

Victor BK3: Ch7

Book 3: Chapter 7: One Way or Another

Victor couldn't help the grin on his face as he drove his new wagon down the southern road out of Gelica. The vidanii were fast when he gave them their head, and the wagon was smooth as butter on the dirt road despite its big, old-fashioned-looking wheels. The Energy-powered shock absorbers the salesman had raved about were working hard to prove he hadn't been full of shit.

Even more pleasing to Victor, the driver's bench was designed much more like a luxury auto seat than an old-timey coach bench. The leather-clad seat wrapped around his prodigious frame comfortably, supporting his back and providing plenty of room for him to stretch his legs forward. Though to get entirely comfortable, he found himself alternating feet up over the box-like enclosure, so he tended to have one leg stretched out and hanging in the breeze.

It wasn't like driving a car—he figured the wagon topped out at around thirty miles per hour, and most of the time, he took it quite a lot slower than that. Still, it beat the hell out of walking, and the vidanii had endurance that bordered on the mythical. Bernale had sold Victor a dimensional bag filled with feed for the animals and shown him a built-in drinking trough that pulled out from the front of the wagon. The trough was fed from the same reservoir dimensional container as the rest of the facilities on the wagon's interior. Bernale insisted it would be years before Victor had to fill it again.

They'd picked up Rhessa just outside the southern gate. She'd been sitting on a short stone wall surrounding a message board covered with flyers describing jobs and special sales and everything else you might find in a newspaper. When Victor saw it, he'd thought about how different life was in a place with no internet or instant messaging, and then he wondered if some Energy-powered alternative could be developed. He'd decided that it was a problem too big for his plate at the moment, but an interesting thing to think about, nonetheless.

Rhessa had looked irritated and wore a heavy scowl when Victor rolled up in the wagon. When he told her that Thayla and Deyni were inside waiting for her, she'd slapped a rolled-up parchment in his hand with a huff and gone inside. The parchment had proven to be a map to Tellen's campsites, and Victor had studied it briefly before storing it away.

The sound of the hatch opening behind him brought Victor back into the present, and he looked around to see Thayla poking her head out. Victor knew she was standing on a ladder near the living compartment's kitchen, and he grinned at her when she hollered, "Are you going to drive all day, or would you like a break?"

"I'm not tired yet," he laughed.

"Well, if you want a break, let me know. I could use one. A break, I mean," she said more quietly.

"Oh? Your friend seemed grumpy. Is she giving you shit about something?" Part of Victor heard his words and how uncouth he was and cringed, and another part just laughed and said, "this is who I am." He felt he'd gone a long way over the last months to speak more clearly and with a broader vocabulary. Still, he also happened to enjoy saying certain words and phrases and wondered why he

should change everything about himself, especially when he was with people who cared about him.

“She’s upset that we left Gelica in such a hurry. She was enjoying Lam’s estate. Now I’m dragging her to a campground to live with roving hunters.” Thayla’s face was pained, and Victor figured she’d been getting an earful for the last few hours while he drove.

“Sorry, Thayla. That sucks.” He shrugged—what else could he say?

“Very helpful.” She snorted and descended back into the wagon’s interior, letting the lacquered wooden hatch fall with a satisfying *thunk*.

Victor drove the wagon through the farmlands south of Gelica for most of the afternoon, and when he came to a crossroads that led away to the east on a much narrower, more overgrown road, he turned that way. According to the map from Lam, Tellen’s autumn camp was in that direction, and if he were right, this was the road he’d need to follow for a day or two before turning south again on a much smaller road still—on the map, it was just a faint, dotted line.

He’d stopped twice in the afternoon to water the vidanii and brush their sweaty fur under their harnesses. Bernale had insisted that the animals were much more evolved than roladii and that they sustained themselves on ambient Energy to a much greater degree, much like higher-level people. Bernale had nodded to Victor as though he were an example of the phenomenon, and it had given Victor pause—how obvious was it that he’d advanced his race and achieved tier-three with his level?

A bump jostled him and brought his thoughts back to the present, and he realized he’d just driven through a deep rut—one that the magical shocks couldn’t fully compensate for. He smiled, thinking about how awesome the wagon was, which opened a whole other can of worms in his mind. Why had he spent such a chunk of his fortune on a fucking wagon? He knew Thayla thought he was trying to impress her or Deyni, but Victor didn’t think that was it. No, he’d wanted it when he’d seen the inside—how comfortable and secure it had seemed.

When he thought about that feeling, he came to the conclusion that he’d been homeless since he arrived in this world, and this wagon gave him a sort of home, mobile though it was. Victor had been forced to sleep in cots, on the ground, in filthy, blood-stained hay. He’d shared a home with other captives, slept on the run, in dungeons, under the sky, or around campfires. The idea of having a place of his own was tremendously appealing, despite its cost and potential impracticality. No, he hadn’t done this for Thayla.

The sun was starting to dip low in the west when he saw a copse of short, bushy, blue-leafed trees not far from the track, and he decided to pull the wagon into their cover for the night. Thin ruts through the grass told the tale of other travelers with similar ideas in the past. Victor followed the old trail around the clump of trees and then into a cleared area at the center. A ring of stones surrounding some ashes occupied the center of the clearing, with dried and cracked logs spread about, probably once used for seating.

Victor pulled on the reins, bringing the vidanii to a halt, and hopped down from the driver’s bench. Bernale had taken the time to explain the harnesses and hitches for the big, docile creatures, and

Victor followed his instructions painstakingly, using Gorz as a cheat. He wasn't sure he'd remember which buckles to remove first, where to stand to avoid a kick or stomp, how to operate the feeding trough, where to hook their leads for the night, and every other little detail without the amulet's help. "Thanks for the help, Gorz."

"It's what I'm here for," the amulet said, managing to sound rather put out, even with his inability to modulate his tone.

"You mad about something, Gorz?" Victor asked.

"No, Victor. I'm just sorry to see us fleeing civilization again without my having read even one book."

"Yeah, I guess I kinda fucked that up, didn't I? I should have bought some books to keep in the wagon, maps too. I promise I'll work on acquiring some of those sorts of things soon, all right?"

"I'll look forward to it," the amulet replied, and Victor thought it sounded a little less peeved, but he figured ninety percent of the emotion he heard from Gorz was due to his own projecting.

"We're stopping?" Thayla asked, head poking out through the main wagon door.

"Yeah, unless you want to really hurry and travel through the night . . ." Victor let his thought trail off, hoping Thayla took the hint that he didn't want to do that.

"No, this is good. Why don't you come in and get some rest? Rhessa is making soup. I'll watch the wagon for a few hours." Thayla hopped down and walked toward the front of the wagon, where Victor gently brushed one of the vidanii as it snuffled around in its feeding trough. Her head barely came up to the animal's shoulder as she reached up and scratched her nails through its short, rust-red fur. The animal snuffled and stamped, enjoying the sensation, at least as far as Victor could tell.

"Think we should name them?" he asked.

"Why not? People name their roladii."

"Well, while you're on watch, try to come up with some ideas. Maybe Deyni will come out and give you some help." Victor held the brush out to Thayla, and when she took it, he started toward the door to the wagon.

"Wait! Why should we think of the names? They're your beasts!" Thayla asked, moving to the other vidanii and starting to brush its sweat-lathered rump.

"I've only ever had dogs and cats as pets. These things ain't no perritos! I've no idea what to call an animal this size!" He laughed, shaking his head as he climbed inside. The wagon's interior was fairly bare-bones, just as Bernale had

said, though the materials used in its construction were rich and warm, and Victor felt his smile spreading as he looked around and breathed in the scent of homemade soup.

Lightly stained, hardwood floors, white-painted wainscoting, and plaster walls gave the space an airy, beach cabin sort of feel, and the sparse furniture made it more spacious than it really was. The coolest thing, in Victor's mind, were the windows and skylights that let in a lot of the light from outside. The tricky thing about them was that they appeared much smaller on the wagon's exterior, and the glass was so dark that you couldn't see through it.

Deyni was sprawled on one of the two beds, drawing in a leather-bound notebook, and Rhessa turned to him with a smile, saying, "Hey, about time you took a break! Soup soon." Victor wanted to remark about her change of demeanor but figured it wouldn't be wise to bring up how she'd been crabby earlier.

After he'd eaten some soup—a deliciously rich sausage and root-vegetable affair, seasoned with herbs Victor couldn't even name—he decided to try to take a nap. He heard Deyni go outside to hang out with her mother, and he saw Rhessa doing some sort of needlework at the table, and then he was out, more tired than he'd realized.

When he woke, some hours later, Rhessa and Deyni were sleeping in the other bed, and the Energy lamps were turned down to just a dim glow. Victor stood, picked up Lifedrinker, and quietly made his way outside. For some reason, he was feeling some dread, and he felt an unreasonable amount of relief when he saw Thayla sitting on a log near a small, flickering fire she'd built in the old campsite. "Hey," he said, "What time is it?"

"I'm not sure, but somewhere around midnight, I'd guess. You drove all day. If you want to keep sleeping, that's fine." Thayla said, poking a stick around in the coals of the fire.

"Nah, I feel great. You should get some sleep!"

"If you're sure, I will. Hey, Deyni and I came up with some names for your beasts, but you have to hear them from her. She has a few ideas for you to choose from!" Thayla said, standing up and brushing the dust from her butt.

"Hah, hell yeah. I knew she'd have a good idea or two. Your friend made some good soup. Did you get a bowl?"

"Yes. I think she's forgiven me for uprooting her life with Deyni. We had a good talk, and when I told her more about my plans and about Oynalla, she started to see how it would be good for Deyni." Thayla had moved closer to Victor as she spoke, and he was surprised when she stepped even closer and pulled him into a hug, resting her head against his chest. "Thanks for everything, Victor," she said softly. "Good night." She gave him another squeeze and then hurriedly climbed the steps into the wagon.

“Night . . .” Victor called after her as she disappeared within. Oynalla’s words from his Spirit Walk came back to him, and he wondered if he was doing something wrong. He definitely had feelings for Thayla, but Oynalla was right—he didn’t want to settle down with the hunters, and he didn’t want to hurt Thayla by starting something he wasn’t going to stick around to finish. “Fuck,” he muttered as he moved over to the fire and sat down on the log Thayla had vacated. He picked up the stick she’d dropped and poked at the coals in frustration.

“Trouble, warrior?” asked a silky, feminine voice from the shadows of the nearby trees. Victor exploded into action, leaping to his feet, ripping Lifedrinker through her loop and into his hands, and casting Globe of Insight, overcharging it with Energy so that it illuminated the clearing like a floodlight. The rich, white light blasted the shadows away from the trees and revealed a Ghelli, hunched down, shielding her eyes from the blazing orb. Her entire form was bathed white from the light, so, as Victor studied her, it took him a moment to realize he was wrong—she was a Naghelli.

Victor glared around the clearing, wondering if more of them were lurking around, but he didn’t see anything in the sparsely wooded grove. The woman before him was crouched low, still shielding her eyes, when she said, “There’s no need for that axe, warrior. I’m only here to talk. Please, if you wouldn’t mind dimming that light a bit, I’d appreciate it.”

“Make it quick, Naghelli,” Victor said, pulling back on the surge of Energy he was pouring into his orb. It dimmed significantly, more like a floating lamp than a stadium floodlight, and the woman sighed in relief, standing up and lowering her hand. Victor immediately recognized her—she was the Naghelli who’d spoken to him as he was about to leave Belikot’s dungeon. The one whose husband he’d split with Lifedrinker. He held his axe firmly in his hands, watching her warily.

“Do you remember me, warrior?” She, perhaps self-consciously, reached a hand up to the glittering, ruby necklace that hung in the deep, open neckline of her silky, black blouse.

“Yeah,” Victor said, alert in the light of his orb, straining to hear or sense any sort of ambush that might be coming. The woman was staring at him, her dark eyes hard to read, but the flesh around them expressive enough. She looked tired and stressed, the bluish tint around her eyes dark and more like a bruise than a hint of color. Her silver hair, still long and shimmering in his light, looked frazzled and slightly unkempt. Perhaps the most significant sign of her distress could be seen in her wings—when Victor had last seen her, the orange spots on their gossamer surface had blazed and glowed, but they now appeared dull.

“Vellia,” she said, nodding, “and you are Victor. I haven’t forgotten.”

“Vellia,” Victor repeated, unable to think of anything other than how like Rellia it sounded. He shook his head, “Well? What do you want?”

“May I sit?” She gestured to a log on her side of the fire.

Victor nodded, but he cast Inspiring Presence. He knew it would be evident to her that he did it, but he didn’t care. He wanted to be alert and ready in case something sneaky was going on. As the inspiration-attuned Energy poured forth into his pathways and affected his mind, everything, as always, seemed clearer. He felt like he could see further into the shadows around the camp, even with his light dimmed down. He noticed how Vellia limped slightly as she stepped to the log, but more than that, he saw how she inhaled deeply and seemed to relax when she felt the effects of his spell—she was benefiting from his aura.

“Thank you,” she said, as though he’d done it to help her. “I feel much better. Victor, I’ve had a harrowing journey and a difficult time finding you. I know you’ve no reason to feel sympathy for me, but I want you to know that I’m here, not to cause you trouble, but to ask for your help.”

“Huh. Seems like asking someone for help can cause plenty of trouble.” He still loomed over her, standing near the coals of the fire, Lifedrinker menacingly hanging before him.

“Warrior, our master has been slain.” She said it like it was something that should shock him or bring him to his knees. So full of desperation was her voice that Victor did feel a little twinge of sympathy, but his overall reaction was to snort.

“Belikot?” he asked, remembering how the Naghelli had freaked out when he said the name in the dungeon. She flinched, but she didn’t caution him this time. “Well? What do you want me to do?”

“We Naghelli are under a geas placed upon us by Belikot centuries ago.” She looked small and pitiful. Though she tried to look into Victor’s eyes, he could see that it was difficult for her to look up at him with his orb floating behind him. He took some pity and sat down on a log across from her, still holding Lifedrinker over his knees.

“Go on,” he said.

“It’s our fault—mine, my sisters and brothers—those of us who served him. He forged the contract, but we signed it. We put our Energy into it and allowed it to happen. We gained much from Belikot at first—power, victories, and a haven after the war. Still, his demands became more and more difficult to bear. I won’t . . . I can’t go into it all, Victor, but even people who’ve done wrong, who’ve hurt others, don’t deserve to have some evils visited upon them. Can you see?”

Her dark eyes had pooled with liquid, and Victor realized she was about to start crying. Victor was having a hard time even understanding what she was talking about. Was she saying that Belikot abused the Naghelli? “Look, I’m sorry for your trouble, but what do you want, exactly?”

“Though Belikot perished, the geas still holds. There must be fragments of his soul still lingering in the world. We feel . . . compelled to find and help him, though we have no way to do so. It’s killing us, Victor!”

“How do you know he died?” Victor asked, wondering how she’d react if she realized he was the one that had done him in.

“He was Spirit Walking—seven of us were chosen, as usual, to guard his body. You see, when he performed a Spirit Walk, he’d often be vulnerable like that for many hours, and so we stood, weapons drawn, ready to defend him, locked deep in his sanctum. He’d been gone many hours when his body began to thrash. It was like watching a person drown. We did everything we could, Victor, but his spirit never returned, and though we poured healing draughts down his throat, his heart stopped beating, his breathing ceased, and his body died.

Still, we didn’t give up on him. We kept his body cold, waiting for his spirit to find its way back, but it never did. We all felt compelled to help him. We feel the need to find him somehow, to heal him, and none of us know how! Are we supposed to find his other spirit shards? Are there any more? We thought he’d gathered them back to himself!”

“Um, how long ago did this happen? Why did you come to me?”

“I marked you well, Victor, just as your little Shadeni friend told me to. I used an artifact of Belikot’s, one that he’d flay me alive for touching, to see past the ward that you wear, the one that blocks out scrying. I had one chance to come to you, Victor, because the artifact had but one use. With dangerous potions fueling me, keeping me running, swifter even than your vidanii, I ran to you.”

“Yeah, but why?” Victor repeated.

“When you parted ways with me, you said you didn’t think you’d be fond of Belikot because of the ‘versions of my master’ you’d met.”

“Ahh, shit. I was exaggerating, Vellia—I only met one version of him. The one that took over Thayla’s body for a while. I, uh, expelled him.”

“To where, Victor? Where is that shard of his soul?” she clasped her hands before her and stared at him, something like hope mixed with despair in her eyes.

“Vellia, how many Naghelli serve Belikot?” Victor asked, his mind racing furiously, trying to figure out how to handle the situation. He didn’t think it would go well for anyone if he gave the Naghelli the fucked-up shard of Belikot that he

had in his dimensional bag. “What about his phylactery—could that have something to do with your, um, what do you call it? Geas?”

“There are thirty-seven of us left, Victor. Please! Tell me what you know of the shard! The phylactery is of no use! Belikot took the shards from it and reabsorbed them—that’s how he was able to start Spirit Walking again.”

“So you guys feel compelled? Like you have to find his missing shard or shards?”

“Yes! The geas begins to affect our ability to absorb Energy. We’ll wither and die if we don’t figure out what to do!”

“What about if Belikot had died like you thought he did? Would the, um, agreement be over?”

“It should be, yes. The fact that we all still suffer tells us that some remnant of Belikot lingers, and we must find a way to help him! Will you please tell me where you left the shard?” Victor looked at her pleading face, the pain in her eyes, and he grunted and stood up. He turned and began to pace back and forth between the wagon and the fire, glancing at Vellia every few steps.

A big part of him wanted to help her. He didn’t know why, though the cynic in him thought it had something to do with her pretty face and how her blouse exposed more of her chest than he was used to seeing. He allowed his mind to wander down the path of possibilities.

If he gave her the insane, cruel Belikot shard in the skull, and they somehow managed to get him into his old body or a new one, what then? That shard of the Death Caster definitely didn’t like Victor, but it didn’t know that he had killed the greater version of itself. Not even Vellia knew that. Would it be so terrible if this little group of Naghelli had a weakened version of their master back?

He paced back and forth a few more times, glowering at Vellia, and she remained silent, apparently able to discern that he was wrestling with a dilemma and not wanting to sway him in the wrong direction. Finally, he growled, shifted Lifedrinker into just his right hand, and said, “I’m about to show you something. If you want my help, you have to promise to stay seated and not try anything. Use your words only. Got it?”

“I swear it, warrior!” she breathed, her eyes suddenly hopeful. Victor reached into the dimensional bag tied to his belt and took out Belikot’s skull. He stared into the eye sockets, daring the weakened spirit within to try something, but they stared back at him, lifeless, with no blue flames announcing Belikot’s presence. Still, Vellia gasped, and he saw her tense and start to stand.

“Stay fucking seated!” he growled, allowing some rage-attuned Energy to flare forth. She dropped back onto the log, but her eyes tracked the skull like a terrier watching a rat. “This what you’re looking for?” he asked, setting the skull on the log where he’d been sitting.

“Yes! I can feel it! He’s in there! Let me take it, Victor. Please! You won’t hear from us again.”

“This thing’s been in my dimensional container for weeks. Belikot was already an asshole; how do you think he’s going to be as an insane asshole?”

Vellia flinched at his words, and he saw a shadow flit behind her eyes, but she said softly, “It doesn’t matter, Victor. If we don’t try to help him, we’ll suffer and die.”

“Now that you see this in front of you, you know what to do? To satisfy the geas thing, I mean?”

“Yes! I feel compelled to help this shard of Belikot. To help it recover as much of its former self as possible . . .” she trailed off, her eyes going wide as Victor lifted Lifedrinker high. “What are you doing?” she screamed as he brought the axe down on the skull, not as hard as he could—he didn’t want to split the skull and send the halves flying. No, he wanted Lifedrinker to get a good long drink, and he didn’t want to give that bit of spirit an easy way out.

“I’m helping you, one way or another,” Victor grunted as Lifedrinker sank effortlessly into the smooth, yellow bone of the skull. He grinned, feeling her vibrate hungrily as thin blue veins of Energy began to spread along the split halves of bone toward her blade. Movement from Vellia caught his eye, and he cast Project Spirit, pushing twisted inspiration Energy at her, and growling, “Sit down!”

Vellia sobbed and fell forward on her hands and knees, and Victor saw the long, onyx-handled dagger clutched in her hand, though she made no move to swing it. She seemed defeated and broken, sobbing in the dirt, inches from the hot embers of the fire. As Lifedrinker shuddered, finished with her feast, and the yellow skull began to crumble into dust, Vellia ceased her shuddering sobs and collapsed the rest of the way to the ground. Though she barely breathed, Victor saw that the orange spots on her wings had begun to glow, ever so faintly, once again.